

Paradise Canto 7

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Canto VII

Argument

In consequence of what had been said by Justinian, who together with the other spirits has now disappeared, some doubts arise in the mind of Dante respecting the human redemption. These difficulties are fully explained by Beatrice.

"Hosanna[1] Sanctus Deus Sabaoth,
Superillustrans claritate tua
Felices ignes horum malahoth."

Thus chanting saw I turn that substance bright,[2]
With fourfold lustre to its orb again,
Revolving; and the rest, unto their dance,
With it, moved also; and, like swiftest sparks,
In sudden distance from my sight were veil'd.

[1: "Hosanna." "Hosanna holy God of Sabaoth, abundantly illumining with thy brightness the blessed fires of these kingdoms."]

[2: Justinian.]

Me doubt possess'd; and "Speak," it wispher'd me,
"Speak, speak unto thy lady; that she quench
Thy thirst with drops of sweetness." Yet blank awe,
Which lords it o'er me, even at the sound
Of Beatrice's name, did bow me down
As one in slumber held. Not long that mood
Beatrice suffer'd; she, with such a smile,
As might have made one blest amid the flames,[3]
Beaming upon me, thus her words began:
"Thou in thy thought art pondering (as I deem,
And what I deem is truth) how just revenge
Could be with justice punish'd: from which doubt
I soon will free thee; so thou mark my words;
For they of weighty matter shall possess thee.
Through suffering not a curb upon the power
That will'd in him, to his own profiting,
That man, who was unborn,[4] condemn'd himself;

[3: So Giusto de' Conti.]

[4: Adam.]

And, in himself, all, who since him have lived,
His offspring: whence, below, the human kind
Lay sick in grievous error many an age;
Until it pleased the Word of God to come
Amongst them down, to His own person joining
The nature from its Maker far estranged,
By the mere act of His eternal love.
Contemplate here the wonder I unfold:
The nature with its Maker thus conjoin'd,
Created first was blameless, pure and good;
But, through itself alone, was driven forth
From Paradise, because it had eschew'd
The way of truth and life, to evil turn'd.
Ne'er then was penalty so just as that
Inflicted by the Cross, if thou regard
The nature in assumption doom'd; ne'er wrong
So great, in reference to Him, who took
Such nature on Him, and endured the doom.
So different effects^[5] flow'd from one act:
For by one death God and the Jews were pleased;
And Heaven was open'd, though the earth did quake.
Count it not hard henceforth, when thou dost hear
That a just vengeance^[6] was, by righteous court,
Justly revenged. But yet I see thy mind,
By thought on thought arising, sore perplex'd;
And, with how vehement desire, it asks
Solution of the maze. What I have heard,
Is plain, thou sayst: but wherefore God this way
For our redemption chose, eludes my search.

[5: The death of Christ was pleasing to God, inasmuch as it satisfied the divine justice; and to the Jews, because it gratified their malignity; and while Heaven opened for joy at man's ransom, the earth trembled through compassion for its Maker.]

[6: The punishment of Christ by the Jews, although just as far as regarded the human nature assumed by Him, and so a righteous vengeance of sin, yet being unjust as regards the divine nature, was itself justly revenged on the Jews by the destruction of Jerusalem.]

"Brother! no eye of man not perfected,
Nor fully ripen'd in the flame of love,
May fathom this decree. It is a mark,
In sooth, much aim'd at, and but little kenn'd:
And I will therefore show thee why such way
Was worthiest. The celestial Love, that spurns
All envying in its bounty, in itself
With such effulgence blazeth, as sends forth

All beauteous things eternal. What distils
Immediate thence, no end of being knows;
Bearing its seal immutably imprest.
Whatever thence immediate falls, is free,
Free wholly, uncontrollable by power
Of each thing new: by such conformity
More grateful to its Author, whose bright beams,
Though all partake their shining, yet in those
Are liveliest, which resemble Him the most.
These tokens of pre - eminence[7] on man
Largely bestow'd, if any of them fail,
He needs must forfeit his nobility,
No longer stainless. Sin alone is that,
Which doth disfranchise him, and make unlike
To the Chief Good; for that its light in him
Is darken'd. And to dignity thus lost
Is no return; unless, where guilt makes void,
He for ill pleasure pay with equal pain.
Your nature, which entirely in its seed
Transgress'd, from these distinctions fell, no less
Than from its state in Paradise; nor means
Found of recovery (search all methods out
As strictly as thou may) save one of these,
The only fords were left through which to wade:
Either, that God had of His courtesy
Released him merely; or else, man himself
For his own folly by himself atoned.

[7: The before - mentioned gifts of immediate creation by God,
independence on secondary causes, and consequent similitude and agreeableness
to the Divine Being, all at first conferred on man.]

"Fix now thine eye, intently as thou canst,
On the everlasting counsel; and explore,
Instructed by my words, the dread abyss.

"Man in himself had ever lack'd the means
Of satisfaction, for he could not stoop
Obeying, in humility so low,
As high, he, disobeying, thought to soar:

And, for this reason, he had vainly tried,
Out of his own sufficiency to pay
The rigid satisfaction. Then behoved
That God should by His own ways lead him back
Unto the life, from whence he fell, restored;
By both His ways, I mean, or one alone.[8]
But since the deed is ever prized the more,
The more the doer's good intent appears;

Goodness celestial, whose broad signature
Is on the universe, of all its ways
To raise ye up, was fain to leave out none.
Nor aught so vast or so magnificent,
Either for Him who gave or who received,
Between the last night and the primal day,
Was or can be. For God more bounty show'd,
Giving Himself to make man capable
Of his return to life, than had the terms
Been mere and unconditional release.
And for His justice, every method else
Were all too scant, had not the Son of God
Humbled Himself to put on mortal flesh.

[8: Either by mercy and justice united or by mercy alone.]

"Now, to content thee fully, I revert;
And further in some part^[9] unfold my speech,
That thou mayst see it clearly as myself.

[9: She reverts to that part of her discourse where she had said that what proceeds immediately from God "no end of being knows." She then proceeds to tell him that the elements, which, though he knew them to be created, he yet saw dissolved, received their form not immediately from God, but from a virtue or power created by God; that the soul of brutes and plants is in like manner drawn forth by the stars with a combination of those elements meetly tempered. "di compassione potenziata"; but that the angels and the heavens may be said to be created in that very manner in which they exist, without any intervention of agency.]

"I see, thou sayst, the air, the fire I see,
The earth and water, and all things of them
Compounded, to corruption turn, and soon
Dissolve. Yet these were also things create.
Because, if what were told me, had been true,
They from corruption had been therefore free.

"The Angels, O my brother! and this clime
Wherein thou art, impassable and pure,
I call created, even as they are

In their whole being. But the elements,
Which thou hast named, and what of them is made,
Are by created virtue inform'd: create,
Their substance; and create, the informing virtue
In these bright stars, that round them circling move.
The soul of every brute and of each plant,
The ray and motion of the sacred lights,
Draw from complexion with meet power endued.
But this our life the Eternal Good inspires

Immediate, and enamours of itself;
So that our wishes rest for ever here.

"And hence thou mayst by inference conclude
Our resurrection certain, if thy mind
Consider how the human flesh was framed,
When both our parents at the first were made."

— Paradise Canto 7